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AUTHOR Stile, Steve; Hudson, Brenda
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ABSTRACT

This paper lists practices recommended by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood concerning work with infants and young children who are gifted, in early intervention and early childhood special education programs. An introductory section discusses the benefits of early intervention with gifted children and notes the increasing number of early childhood programs for children who are gifted. Categories of recommended practices in gifted education are identified and discussed, including: assessment, individualized education programs and individualized family service plans, service delivery model/environment, general curriculum/intervention strategies, communication interventions, motor interventions, cognitive interventions, adaptive behavior interventions, social-emotional interventions, transition, personnel competence, program evaluation, and family participation. Seventy-five recommended practices, divided into these categories, are then listed. (Contains 11 references.) (JDD)

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Early Intervention with Children who are Gifted

Steve Stile and Brenda Hudson

Opponents of identification and programming for young children who are gifted have argued that (a) "hurrying" young children is potentially damaging, (b) standardized intelligence measures have lower reliability for these children, and (c) that a potential exists for misidentification of children who are "early bloomers" rather than "truly gifted" (Kitano & Kirby, 1986). Such opposition has resulted in delay of identification and services in many school districts until the third or fourth grade. Gallagher (1988) has called for attention to needs of young children as one priority in his national agenda for educating children who are gifted. In his analysis, young children are one of several subpopulations of children who are underserved.

Despite the opposition, a growing number of authorities in the field of gifted education have pinpointed benefits of early intervention (Stile, Kitano, Kelley, & LeCrone, in press). First, early recognition can provide opportunities for professionals and parents to interact on issues of development and advocacy (Karnes, Shwedel, & Linnemeyer, 1981). Second, enriched preschool programs provide opportunities for young children to nurture their high potential and demonstrate their strengths (Kitano, 1990). Third, early recognition and nurturance of talents may foster children's mental health (Karnes & Johnson, 1991). Fourth, early childhood programs have been viewed as the best policy initiative for disadvantaged youth (VanTassel-Baska, Patton, & Prillaman, 1989). Fifth, prevention of

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Members of the working group for this strand were: Ann Berman, Janet Candelaria, Merle Karnes, Mary Brady Kovacs, Barbara Morrison, Ann Stile, and Nancy Tafoya.

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under achievement among students who are gifted may be accomplished in part by early identification and placement in challenging preschool and kindergarten programs (Kitano & Kirby, 1986).

In recognition of these and other benefits, the number of early childhood programs for children who are gifted has increased over the past 10 years especially at the kindergarten level. Stile, et al. (in press) surveyed 50 states, five territories, and Washington, D.C. Responses were received from 100% of the states, 60% of the territories, and Washington, D.C. Respondents reported over 51 preschool programs in 14 states and 1 territory. Kindergarten programs for children who are gifted were reported in 29 states and 1 territory within over 2,655 school districts. Kindergarten programs are funded through regular education (40%), special education (17%), and other (13%) sources. The primary source of preschool funding is parent tuitions.

Recommended Practices

Seventy-seven indicators of recommended practice have been validated by the field for use in early intervention programs for children who are gifted in 13 areas which are defined briefly below.

Assessment

According to Bailey and Wolery (1989), "assessment may be defined as the process of gathering information for the purpose of making a decision (p.2)." With respect to programs for preschoolers who are gifted, assessment is interdisciplinary, considers multiple domains and uses a variety of sources and methods such as naturalistic observations, family interviews and standardized instruments. Assessments are conducted in order to make decisions in

relation to identification and screening, eligibility, program planning, ongoing monitoring, and final program evaluation.

IEP

Although students who are gifted are not included in federal legislation requiring individualized education programs, a number of states have recommended or required IEPs for these students (Kitano & Kirby, 1986). IEPs for preschoolers who are gifted are developed by members of multiple disciplines as well as family members. IEPs reflect the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of families and address multiple domains of development.

Service Delivery Model/Environment

The service delivery model/environment for preschoolers who are gifted is appropriate for developmental age, allows ample use of imagination, and employs a large variety of activities and materials. The indicators of recommended practice are based upon the assumption that quality of the setting in which services are provided impacts significantly upon development in multiple domains.

General Curriculum/Intervention Strategies

General curriculum and intervention strategies for preschoolers who are gifted provide opportunities to learn through engagement in activities young children enjoy. Curriculum activities encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving while focusing on social problems or broad themes such as ecology. Preschool forms of academics are also addressed. The strategies are derived from and based upon (a) individual abilities and needs of the children, (b) families' preferences, and (c) philosophy of the program.

Communication Interventions

According to Kitano and Kirby (1986), "Effective communication requires several different skills: articulating orally and in writing one's feelings and ideas, recognizing and interpreting the feelings and expressions of others, and understanding visual cues (p. 258)." Communication interventions for preschoolers who are gifted involve professionals who participate with children as "co-learners" in activities, foster exploration of different ways of communicating (e.g., sign language), encourage communication among classmates or with normally developing or developmentally delayed children throughout the day, and provide opportunities to exchange ideas, express opinions, and tell about feelings.

Motor Interventions

Motor development refers to the process of acquiring the necessary postural control and movement components to perform purposeful volitional movements (Bailey & Wolery, 1989). Motor interventions result in achievement of motor milestones such as sitting or running which are results of combining and recombining components. For preschoolers who are gifted, opportunities should be provided to use large and fine motor skills, to explore alternative ways of movements, and occupational and physical therapy support staff should participate in planning intervention activities when needs arise.

Cognitive Interventions

According to Flavell (1982), cognition is composed of unobservable events, their subsequent comprehension, and resultant response. For young children who are gifted, professionals should encourage group problem solving, praise children for their ideas and solutions, and respond to children's questions with appropriate levels of interest and

attention. Cognitive interventions are applied to assist preschoolers who are gifted to attain higher order understanding, skills, and attitudes.

Adaptive Behavior Interventions

Adaptive behavior consists of changes in children's behavior as they adapt to the environment in relation to their levels of maturation, development, and learning. As described by Kitano and Kirby (1986), "adaptation consists of two complementary processes: (a) assimilation, or incorporating features of the environment into the child's existing structures, and (b) accommodation, the modifying of one's structures in response to environmental demands (pp. 48-49)." Professionals base adaptive behavior in such areas as self-care on children's individual characteristics and needs reflected in IEPs.

Social-Emotional Interventions

Social-emotional interventions with young children who are gifted address the quality of interpersonal relationships with peers and caregivers across a variety of settings (e.g., the classroom, school, community, and home). As Kitano and Kirby (1986) have pointed out, "not all gifted children are superior in social knowledge (p. 64)." Therefore, interventions for preschoolers who are gifted address development of appropriate interactions, and target inappropriate interactions for change. Strategies include acknowledging and respecting children's feelings and personality traits, providing small group activities designed to foster cooperative learning, reorganizing group activities to achieve ethnic/gender mix, and dealing with inappropriate interactions with discretion and flexibility.

Transition

Transition is the process of change between services. Professionals attempt to foster

smooth transitions in a variety of ways for caregivers and service providers. Activities include organizing field trips to public school kindergarten programs for children and caregivers, developing transition plans, and providing previous assessment information to public school/other systems upon request.

Personnel Competence

According to Kitano and Kirby (1986), experts tend to agree that teachers of students who are gifted need expertise in curriculum development and appropriate modifications for this population, knowledge of instructional strategies and materials, and an ability to effectively communicate within the education ecosystem. Personnel development efforts for gifted preschool programs include recruitment, preparation, and retention of personnel from all early intervention-related disciplines.

Program Evaluation

Planned evaluation is carried out in order to make informed decisions about individual children and to identify changes that need to be made that impact entire programs. This requires that both continuous (formative) and overall (summative) evaluation techniques be employed. In order to be useful, evaluation efforts need to be timely and accurate while recognizing limited resources and problems unique to preschoolers who are gifted. For example, Renzulli and Smith (1979) have pointed out that a behavioral objectives model is inappropriate because it requires a focus on behaviors that can be observed and counted rather than on higher order cognitive processes such as those identified by Bloom (1956).

Family Participation

Family members are equal members of and active participants in programs for

preschoolers who are gifted. Family members provide information to professionals in relation to program eligibility. They also work with professionals in the development of IEPs. Other participation includes field trips, reinforcing concepts at home, parent group meetings, mentoring, assisting in the classroom, and collecting/developing instructional materials. Professionals assist families by providing such resources as guest lecturers, books, audio tapes, films, and other sources of information and skill.

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DEC Recommended Practices
Programs for Children who are Gifted

Assessment

G1. Assessment occurs through an interdisciplinary team effort.

G2. Professionals consider the value families place on "giftedness" when conducting assessments of children.

G3. Professionals conduct assessments of children in warm, friendly environments.

G4. Licensed school psychologists/diagnosticians participate on the assessment team.

G5. Assessment is an ongoing process.

G6. Children's levels of development are considered within and across multiple domains (e.g., cognitive, motor, communication, social).

G7. Professionals use a variety of sources and methods, such as naturalistic observations, family interviews, and standardized assessment in the assessment process.

G8. Professionals may use parent nomination as one form of information when assessing children for eligibility purposes.

G9. Professionals use assessment instruments and techniques that are sensitive to the child's and family's cultural values and primary language spoken in the home.

IEP/IFSP

G10. The IEP/IFSP process actively involves members of multiple disciplines (inter- or transdisciplinary) as well as family members.

G11. IEP/IFSPs reflect children's strengths as well as their needs.

G12. The IEP/IFSP objectives reflect the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of families and children in the program.

G13. The IEP/IFSP addresses multiple domains (e.g., cognition, communication, social skills).

C14. Elementary-level academic goals/objectives are developed only at the request of the families or in response to demonstrated readiness of the child.

Service Delivery Model/Environment

G15. Professionals provide a warm, positive, stimulating (e.g., bright, colorful) environment.

G16. Professionals organize classrooms into well-defined areas for specific activities.

G17. Professionals change activities and materials often.

G18. Professionals provide clear and consistent cues about transitions within activities or routines in the schedule.

G19. Environments contain child-sized furniture and equipment appropriate for developmental age ranges.

G20. Environments allow for ample use of imagination and opportunities to create with a variety of hands-on activities.

G21. Children who are not gifted (normally developing, developmentally delayed) participate in the program all or part of the time.

General Curriculum/Intervention Strategies

G22. The curriculum integrates the social science disciplines by focusing on social problems or broad themes (such as technology or ecology).

G23. Professionals employ thematic units as a routine aspect of the curriculum.

G24. The time allotted to curriculum units is flexible in order to take advantage of children's interests and spontaneous ideas.

G25. The program provides frequent and appropriate field trips.

G26. Curriculum activities encourage critical thinking, creativity, curiosity, and problem solving.

G27. Professionals use games and activities (e.g., calendar) to teach preschool forms of academics, such as letter and number recognition.

G28. Professionals give children opportunities to learn through engagement in activities they enjoy.

G29. Curriculum activities allow exploration of the beginning (e.g., awareness) stages of career development.

G30. Professionals integate learning opportunities into natural activities rather than artificially structured activities (e.g. putting 10 toy people in a bus and taking them for a ride rather than counting while putting 10 pegs in a pegboard).

G31. Professionals vary the settings, materials, personnel, cues, and consequences in order to promote

generalization.

G32. The program provides guest speakers when appropriate (e.g., a chemist visits the program and provides a demonstration of various chemical reactions during an energy unit).

Communication Interventions

G33. Professionals encourage children to exchange ideas, express their opinions and talk about their feelings.

G34. Professionals encourage children to listen to others without interrupting them.

G35. Professionals encourage children to solve disputes by discussions and compromise.

G36. Professionals use open-ended questions.

G37. Curriculum activities foster (on a daily basis) children's exploration of different ways of communicating (e.g., Spanish, sign language).

G38. Curriculum activities encourage communication among peers throughout the day.

G39. Professionals participate with children as "co-learners" in activities.

Physical/Motor Interventions

G40. Children have opportunities to use large-motor skills (e.g., swinging, climbing, dancing).

G41. The program provides supervised outdoor playground activities daily.

G42. Children explore alternative ways of movement indoors and outdoors (e.g., children can scoot to circle time).

G41. Active manipulative activities provide opportunities for children to develop fine-motor skills.

C42. Occupational and physical therapy support staff participate in planning intervention activities when children's needs dictate.

Cognitive Skills Interventions

G43. Professionals enlist families to support at home the use of open-ended questioning, alternative thinking, problem solving, and higher order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation.

G44. Professionals employ a holistic approach to learning.

G45. Preschool-level books are available to children in the classroom.

G46. Professionals encourage group problem solving.

G47. Professionals praise and encourage children for their ideas and solutions.

G48. Professionals respond to children's questions with appropriate levels of interest and understanding.

Adaptive Behavior Interventions

G49. Professionals base adaptive behavior interventions (e.g., self-care, independence, etc.) on children's individual characteristics and needs as reflected in the IEP/IFSP.

Social-Emotional Interventions

G50. Professionals acknowledge and respect children's feelings and personality traits.

G51. Professionals encourage children to identify and verbalize their feelings.

G52. Children participate in small group activities designed to foster cooperative learning.

G53. Professionals make children feel their contributions are important and valued.

G54. Curriculum activities are fun and encourage laughter.

G55. Counselors and psychologists serve as support staff when needed.

G56. Professionals may reorganize ongoing group activities to achieve ethnic/gender mix.

G57. Professionals encourage children to interact with peers but do not force interaction if children express a preference for being alone.

G58. Professionals deal with inappropriate behavior firmly but with discretion and flexibility.

Transition

G59. The program provides parents/family members with an orientation about what to expect in public school kindergarten.

G60. The program provides assessment information to public schools if requested by parents.

G61. The program organizes field trips to public school kindergartens for children and parents.

G62. Professionals develop preschool-public school transition plans.

G63. Private preschool and public-school kindergarten eligibility criteria are consistent in order to achieve continuity.

Personnel Competence

G64. Professionals have coursework, training, and experience in gifted education.

G65. Professionals have knowledge of gifted research findings.

G66. Professionals engage in ongoing upgrading of skills and knowledge through inservice training and participation in professional organizations.

Program Evaluation

G67. Program evaluation includes an ongoing record of informal comments and suggestions by families and staff.

G68. Families provide a formal written evaluation at the end of the year of their child's participation.

G69. Program evaluation includes information solicited from multiple sources.

G70. Program evaluation information is both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

G71. Professionals from outside the program are employed as program evaluators.

Family Participation

G72. Programs allow families to participate at their level of choice (e.g., acquire information, work as teaching assistant).

G73. The program makes available to families a resource library of books, audiotapes, films and other materials.

G74. The program organizes and provides periodic parent group meetings, if the parents express a desire for the meetings.

G75. Professionals welcome family members in the preschool program at anytime.